

Blackbird Killing Confirms HSUS Fears of Cruelty

HSUS's warning that aerial spraying of blackbirds with detergent would be cruel and ineffective was confirmed in the aftermath of a series of sprayings in Kentucky last February.

After witnessing a spraying operation at Ft. Campbell, Ky., HSUS Field Representative Herbert N. Martin said the method used to kill the birds should be condemned. "The birds I observed after the spraying operation appeared to suffer pain or stress for an extended period of time," he said. "It took from 25 minutes to several hours for the birds to die."

After a previous spraying in Paducah, Ky., HSUS received reports that clean-up crews were picking up live birds, unable to fly, with a stick that had a nail affixed to the end. Martin visited Paducah after the spraying and said he found it incredible that the birds, already suffering from the spraying, were subjected to still another cruel act.

In December, HSUS threatened to go to court unless the Army prepared and filed an environmental impact statement for planned sprayings at Ft. Campbell and the Milan Army Ammunition Plant in Tennessee. After reviewing the impact statement HSUS urged the Army to abandon its proposed spraying operations and find a long-range solution to the blackbird problem.

In a letter to Col. W.F. Gardiner, head of the Army's Environmental Office, HSUS Vice President and General Counsel Murdaugh Stuart Madden said: "It is obvious that the present proposal is pure stop-gap and no more than an attempt to satisfy citizen pressure. The Army does not seriously contend that it will provide anything more than temporary relief. At best the spraying program will constitute an exercise in futility and inefficiency."

The Army and municipal officials of Paducah and Madisonville, Ky., ignored HSUS's warnings and launched a series of aerial spraying operations that resulted in the freezing to death of nearly a million birds. Local citizens complained that the birds had become a menace to aviation, were damaging agriculture, and spreading disease. Heli-



AP Wirephoto

HSUS Field Representative Herbert N. Martin (left) inspects dead and dying birds sprayed by Tergitol after the Army sprayed some 300,000 blackbirds roosting at Ft. Campbell, Ky.

copters and light aircraft dumped thousands of gallons of Tergitol, a biodegradable detergent, on the birds during the killing operations.

The aerial spraying began after Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren E. Burger denied a permanent injunction requested by two animal welfare groups seeking to block the Army's bird killing program. The Army pressed for a speedy decision by the court in order to kill most of the birds before they could migrate north to reproduce.

The Ft. Campbell bird killing operation was conducted under what the Army termed "optimum conditions," yet Martin found that the birds suffered for what he considered "an inexcusable length of time." "Obviously the Army was better equipped and prepared for such spraying operations than any small municipality, yet their operation under optimum conditions resulted in the mistreatment of animals within the meaning of Kentucky's anti-cruelty laws," Martin said. "The municipal spraying operations conducted at Paducah and Madisonville under less than optimum conditions in all likelihood resulted in greater suffering."

Madden also wrote the governor and attorney general of Kentucky to urge a public statement be made warning Kentuckians who may be contemplating kill-

ing birds by the Tergitol-water method that such actions are in violation of state anti-cruelty laws. "Unless you take immediate action to condemn these practices, we fear that a 'spraying fever' will spread," Madden said. HSUS has received reports from other towns in Kentucky and neighboring states of plans to kill birds by the Tergitol-water method.

On Feb. 19, in a night attack, two helicopters flew over a pine stand at Ft. Campbell and released jets of detergent on 2 to 4 million roosting birds. After the spraying, fire trucks doused the birds with thousands of gallons of water. The detergent, when mixed with water, removes the natural insulating oil from the birds' feathers, causing them to freeze to death.

When Army officials began the death count at daylight, an estimated one-half million birds lay dead on the frozen pine needles of the 8-acre grove. It was the Army's opinion after witnessing the spraying operation and clean-up that the method employed was the most humane possible under "existing conditions."

HSUS hopes the cruel results of the sprayings, coupled with the surge of negative public reaction, will convince the federal government and local communities to find alternative methods of blackbird control in the future. □